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ABSTRACT

This study investigated the nature of written instructor responses to student writings and the relationship of these written responses to the quality of subsequent student work in urban elementary and middle schools. Most of the 22 instructors who submitted the study's body of student writings (n=114) provided their students with some sort of written feedback, and most of their students incorporated that feedback into their subsequent drafts. Instructors tended to focus most on standardizing their students' written output, with measurable success. Student papers received little feedback about content or organization, and these qualities generally did not change over successive drafts. Despite the proliferation of reform programs targeting urban schools, classroom teachers may need more support to improve the skills and knowledge necessary to implement reform practices in the teaching of writing. The present study could help focus these reform efforts by helping teachers improve the quality of their feedback on student writing at both the elementary and secondary level. (Contains 7 tables, 3 figures, and 29 references.) (SLD)

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CSE Technical Report 526

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Project 1.2 Assessment in Action Lindsay Clare, Project Director CRESST/UCLA

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LEARNING TO WRITE IN URBAN ELEMENTARY AND MIDDLE SCHOOLS: AN INVESTIGATION OF TEACHERS' WRITTEN FEEDBACK ON STUDENT COMPOSITIONS

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Abstract

In writing instruction, feedback from teachers provides a critical opportunity for students to revise their work and improve as writers. Contexts in which students routinely receive feedback on their work include peer reviews and teacher-student conferences. For many teachers, however, written comments on student papers remain a significant method of response. Despite the importance of teacher responses to student work in facilitating the learning process, little research has examined the relationship between teacher feedback on early drafts of student work and the quality of students' subsequent drafts. Even less research has examined the nature of teachers' written feedback to students in K-12 settings. This study investigates the nature of written instructor responses to student writings and the relationship of these written responses to the quality of subsequent student work in urban elementary and middle schools. Most of the 22 instructors who provided the study's corpus of student writings (N = 114) provided their students with some written feedback, and most of their students incorporated that feedback into their subsequent drafts. Instructors tended to focus most on standardizing their students' written output, with measurable success. Student papers received little feedback about content or organization, and these qualities generally did not change over successive drafts.

For the past two decades, teachers have been encouraged to adopt a process-oriented pedagogy for teaching writing that stresses a cycle of teacher feedback and student revision. This approach to writing as a developmental learning process is consistent with sociocultural theory, which views development as rooted and unfolding in social contexts (Gee, 1990; Heath, 1983; Rogoff, 1990; Schiefflin & Gilmore, 1986; Schiefflin & Ochs, 1986; Scollon & Scollon, 1981; Tharp & Gallimore, 1988; Vygotsky, 1978, 1986). From this perspective, children acquire new skills through participation in activities that are supported—or scaffolded—by a more

knowledgeable participant. Successful literacy acquisition thus hinges on the extent to which novices are given opportunities to engage in meaningful literacy practices that build on their funds of knowledge (Moll & Greenberg, 1990) and work within students' zones of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1986).

In writing instruction, teachers' feedback and students' opportunity to revise their work based on this feedback are key for this developmental process. Novice writers need specific direction and guidance to evaluate, modify, or restructure their ideas and to add and delete content to improve the quality of their writing (Keppner, 1991; Olson & Raffeld, 1987). Ideally, teacher feedback provides students with the opportunity to expand and shape their ideas over subsequent drafts of their work (Ferris, 1997; Sternglass, 1998). Through this assisted process, students become better writers by gradually appropriating the skills necessary to critically view and revise their own work. Zellermayer (1989) quoted Arthur N. Applebee when he wrote that learning to write, like all other learning, is

> a process of gradual internalization of routines and procedures available to the learning from the social and cultural context in which the learning takes place. Typically new skills are learned by engaging collaboratively in tasks that would be too difficult for the individual to undertake alone but that can be completed successfully in interaction with a parent or teacher. In this interaction the role of the parent or teacher is to provide the necessary support, or scaffolding, to allow the child to complete the task, and in the process, to provide the child with an understanding of the problem and of the strategies available for its solution. (p. 160)

The goal of this study was to investigate teacher responses on drafts of student compositions in urban elementary and middle schools. Contexts in which students routinely receive feedback on their work include peer reviews and teacher-student conferences. For many teachers, however, written comments on student papers remain a significant method of response (Ferris, 1997). While both the social and written contexts in which feedback is given are important to study, the specific purpose of this study was to investigate the nature of written instructor responses to student writings and the relationship of these written responses to the quality of student work.

Despite the importance of teacher response to student work in facilitating the learning process, little research has examined the relationship between teacher feedback on early drafts of student work and the quality of students' subsequent drafts. Even less research has examined the nature of teachers' written feedback to

students in K-12 settings. Most of the research in this area has focused on college students in general, and more specifically, on college students who are second language learners (Ferris, 1997; Keppner, 1991; Olson & Raffeld, 1987; Zamel, 1985). Researchers generally have found that teacher feedback during the revision process that focuses on the content features of student writings (i.e., encouraging students to add and delete content and/or restructure content) as opposed to surface features (i.e., word choice, spelling, grammar, and punctuation) is associated with higher quality compositions (Keppner, 1991; Olson & Raffeld, 1987). Ferris (1997) similarly found that certain types of written comments appeared to lead to more successful revisions by college students who are English language learners. For example, she found that teacher requests for information, summary comments on grammar, and text-specific comments on early drafts of student work appeared to lead to more successful revisions, whereas questions or statements that provided information to students and less specific comments were less successful.

Based in part on this body of work and the need for research in this area involving younger students, we investigated the following research questions:

- What is the nature of teachers' written feedback to third- and seventh-grade students?
- Does the type of feedback students receive on early drafts of their compositions lead to improvement in the quality of final drafts?

Importance of the Study

This study adds important empirical information about a critical instructional process in language arts instruction—teachers' feedback to students—and provides important information as well about student opportunities to learn in urban school environments (National Council on Education Standards and Testing, 1992; Selden, 1988; Shavelson, McDonnell, & Oakes, 1989). Despite a proliferation of reform programs targeting urban schools over the past 20 years, there has been little change in the academic achievement of poor and minority students, who continue to perform well below state and national norms on standardized tests of achievement. According to the National Commission on Teaching and America's Future (1996), many teachers have difficulty achieving instructional goals set out in many reform programs because they do not have the knowledge and skills needed to significantly improve the quality of the learning environments they create for students. This problem is especially pronounced in urban schools, where there tend to be fewer

experienced teachers and greater numbers of students with special learning needs (National Commission on Teaching and America's Future, 1996). The present study could help focus reform efforts by drawing attention to this critical aspect of practice and providing meaningful information to teachers about ways to improve writing instruction in their classrooms.

Methods

Written feedback from teachers was investigated with a corpus of 114 pieces of student writing, including rough and final drafts from urban third- and seventh-grade classrooms (50 pieces of elementary student writing and 64 pieces of middle school student writing). This corpus was collected in 10 schools (five elementary and five middle schools) over a two-year period as part of a larger study evaluating the influence of a large-scale school reform initiative on the quality of students' learning environments (N = 11 elementary school teachers and N = 11 middle school teachers). Teachers' work experience ranged from approximately 2 to 28 years. The schools in our study served primarily minority students who are English language learners. The percentage of children in our sample schools receiving free or reduced-price lunches ranged from 56.6% to 96.4% (see Table 1).

Procedures and Measures

Teachers were asked to provide us with four language arts assignments—"typical" writing with multiple drafts, "typical" reading comprehension, content

Table 1
Demographics for Elementary and Middle Schools (N = 10)

	Elementary schools (n = 5)		Middle schools (n = 5)	
	%	% Range	%	% Range
Enrollment by ethnicity				
Asian	7.3	0.3 – 27.0	7.1	0.7 – 22.4
African American	9.9	1.1 – 20.0	14.4	0.6 – 35.5
Latino	68.5	34.0 – 92.1	64.1	41.0 – 92.7
White	11.7	0.5 – 37.3	10.2	0.3 – 31.9
Other	2.4	0.3 – 7.0	4.2	0.6 – 17.0
English language learner	69.1	50.4 – 82.2	44.0	30.0 – 60.2
Free/reduced lunch	91.2	86.7 – 96.4	75.5	56.6 – 86.9

area writing (elementary school only), and a "challenging" major project. Teachers also were asked to complete a one-page information sheet for each assignment and to submit four samples of student work for each assignment: two that they considered to be of "medium" quality and two of "high" quality. The teacher assignment materials (notebook, cover sheets, consent forms, etc.) were distributed in the fall and collected in the winter and spring.

In this study we focused on the type and quality of feedback offered on the typical student writing assignment only (a final writing project with earlier drafts). Assignments that did not include rough drafts of student work were not included in the analyses. The personnel who had given students feedback in classroom conferences were categorized based on teachers' self-report on their assignment cover sheets. The type of writing elicited (informative, persuasive, narrative) and the academic nature of the writing (i.e., whether the assignment required students to interact with content knowledge [including knowledge of literature] also were categorized. The number of words in student writings was included as an indicator of writing fluency and quality (Patthey-Chavez & Clare, 1996; see Table 2).

Table 2

Descriptive Information about Assignments and Student Work ($N = 114$)

	Elementary school ($n = 50$)	Middle school ($n = 64$)
Type of writing elicited		
Informative	20%	59%
Persuasive	—	19%
Narrative	80%	22%
Academic content knowledge elicited		
None	88%	33%
Other discipline-based	4%	20%
Literature-based	8%	47%
Mean number of words in students' essays	133 ($SD = 98$)	270 ($SD = 172$)
Persons who gave feedback during writing process		
Teacher only	8%	29%
Peers only	—	3%
Teacher and peers	80%	51%
Teacher, peers, and others	12%	5%
Nobody	—	12%

Following Olson and Raffeld (1987), one researcher categorized the type of feedback students received on each draft as "surface level" or "content level." Student papers that received no written comments were noted as well. Reliability of the categorical designations was assessed by having a second researcher independently score 20% of the assignments chosen at random. Interrater agreement for these scales was 80%. The amount of written feedback students received on their drafts was determined by obtaining a ratio of the number of edits and comments a student received divided by the number of words in the composition.

Drafts of student writings were rated by a bilingual rater using three standards-based scales measuring organization, content, and writing mechanics, use of language, grammar, and spelling (MUGS). These scales are from the Language Arts Project rubric developed by CRESST at UCLA in partnership with the Los Angeles Unified School District and United Teachers-Los Angeles (Higuchi, 1996). Each of these dimensions was rated on a 4-point scale (1 = *poor*, 4 = *excellent*). Reliability of these ratings was assessed by having another bilingual researcher independently score 20% of the assignments chosen at random. Overall exact scale-point agreement for the student work scales was 81%.

Analyses

Descriptive statistics and frequencies were computed to examine the quality of student writing and type of feedback teachers gave to students on their written work. Correlation coefficients were used to investigate the relationship between teacher feedback and the quality of student work, and *t* tests for paired samples were conducted to explore changes in the quality of student work from earlier drafts to their final draft. Regression analyses were then used to investigate the relative influence of teacher feedback on the quality of final drafts of student compositions. Finally, a more qualitative approach was adapted from earlier studies tracking longitudinal changes in student writings across multiple drafts (Ferris, 1997; Patthey-Chavez & Clare, 1996; Patthey-Chavez & Ferris, 1997). This involved classifying and then tracking particular teacher recommendations from draft to draft to see whether they were taken up and incorporated into student revisions. This final analysis adds important information about teacher feedback in the K-12 system to the typology of teacher responses developed to date.

Results

To address our first research question concerning the nature of teachers' written feedback to students, we examined the amount and type of feedback students received on drafts of their compositions. As illustrated in Table 3, our results indicate that the students by and large had limited opportunity to receive content-level feedback on their writing in both elementary and middle school. Fifty-eight percent of the students received only surface-level feedback on drafts of their compositions. This trend was more pronounced in third grade, where fewer students received any kind of written feedback and less content-level feedback was offered than in seventh grade. Students in middle schools received slightly more feedback than the elementary school students as evidenced by the ratio of edits per number of words in the student work samples (see Table 3).

To investigate our second research question concerning the influence of teachers' written feedback on the quality of student work, we first looked at the difference in the length of student essays from the preliminary to the final drafts written by those students who received surface-level versus content-level written feedback. We found that middle school students who received content-level feedback increased the length of their essays from the preliminary to the final drafts by an average of 48.14 words (see Table 4). Middle school students who received only surface-level feedback, in contrast, increased the length of their essays by an average of 16.86 words. Elementary school student essays did not increase in length on the whole from the preliminary to the final drafts. In fact, student essays that received only surface-level feedback tended to decrease in length by an average of

Table 3

Type and Amount of Written Feedback on Student Essays

	Elementary school (n = 50)	Middle school (n = 64)
Type of written feedback		
None	28%	8%
Surface level	58%	58%
Content level	14%	34%
Amount of written feedback		
Average ratio of edits to total number of words per student work sample	.08 (SD = .08)	.04 (SD = .04)

Table 4

Type of Written Feedback and Change in the Number of Words in Student Essays From Preliminary to Final Drafts

	Elementary school *M* (*SD*)	Middle school *M* (*SD*)
Type of written feedback		
Surface level (n = 66)	-4.72 (21.98)	16.86 (37.25)
Content level (n = 29)	0.00 (27.47)	48.14 (61.82)

4.72 words. While the small sample precludes any statistical analysis, this finding concurs with other research on the importance of providing content-level feedback to fledgling writers.

We then used regression analytic techniques to further investigate the influence of teachers' written feedback on the quality of student work. These analyses revealed that when the quality of first drafts was held constant, the type of feedback students received did not influence the quality of the final drafts of student work (see Tables 5 and 6). The amount of teachers' written feedback predicted improvement in student writing with regard to mechanics (i.e., punctuation, grammar, and spelling) at both the elementary school (b = 2.61, R^2 = .14, $p < 0.01$) and middle school (b = 3.24, R^2 = .13, $p < 0.01$). Given the relative prevalence of instructor feedback on mechanics, this result is hardly surprising. In essence, students appeared to respond to the actual feedback they received.

Table 5

Results of Multiple Regression Analysis for Elementary School Student Work (n = 50)

	Outcome score								
	Content			Organization			MUGS		
Predictor	b	β	R^2	b	β	R^2	b	β	R^2
Standardized amount of feedback (ratio)	—	—	—	—	—	—	2.61**	.38**	.14
Type of feedback (none/surface/content)	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—

Note. MUGS = Mechanics, Usage, Grammar, Spelling.

**$p < 0.01$.

Table 6

Results of Multiple Regression Analysis for Middle School Student Work ($n = 64$)

	Outcome score								
	Content			Organization			MUGS		
Predictor	*b*	β	R^2	*b*	β	R^2	*b*	β	R^2
Standardized amount of feedback (ratio)	—	—	—	—	—	—	3.24**	.36**	.13
Type of feedback (none/surface/content)	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—

Note. MUGS = Mechanics, Usage, Grammar, Spelling.

**$p < 0.01$.

To further investigate the relative influence of the type of feedback students received on drafts of their compositions, we examined the degree to which student compositions changed in quality from early drafts to the final draft. The results of this analysis indicate that elementary school students' compositions on the whole improved with regard to the quality of writing mechanics (MUGS) from the early draft to the final draft ($t = 3.90$, $df = 49$, $p < 0.001$), but not with regard to the quality of the content or organization. Middle school students made very small gains overall in the quality of their essay content ($t = 2.18$, $df = 63$, $p < 0.05$) and organization ($t = 3.21$, $df = 63$, $p < 0.05$) (see Table 7). This minimal improvement may be attributed in part to the lack of quality feedback students received. As described earlier, only 34% of the feedback provided on middle school essays and 14% of the feedback provided on elementary school essays addressed content-level issues (see Table 3). Our findings suggest that the lack of improvement in the quality of students' essays reflects, at least in part, the absence of quality feedback on early drafts of their writing. Again, students appeared to respond to the type of feedback they received.

Table 7

Mean Difference Scores From Early to Final Drafts of Student Work

	Elementary school ($n = 50$)				Middle school ($n = 64$)			
	M	*SD*	Min.	Max.	*M*	*SD*	Min.	Max.
Content	.02	.14	0	1	.09*	.34	-1	1
Organization	.06	.24	0	1	.14*	.35	0	1
MUGS	.30***	.54	-1	2	.08	.37	-1	1

Note. The scale for each item ranged from 1 to 4.

*$p < 0.05$. ***$p < 0.001$.

Summary of Results From the Statistical Analyses

In summary, the quality of student writing showed relatively little improvement over successive drafts, and students received little by way of content-level written feedback on early drafts of their writing. Most of the feedback students received pertained to improving punctuation, grammar, and spelling, and students responded by improving punctuation, grammar, and spelling. On the whole, middle school students who received content-level feedback had a greater increase in the length of their essays from the preliminary to the final drafts than middle school students who only received surface-level feedback. The length of the elementary school students' essays, in contrast, basically remained the same regardless of the type of feedback they received. When the quality of students' early drafts was held constant, however, the type of written feedback students received did not predict improvement in the quality of student work as assessed on a standards-based rubric at both levels of schooling. The amount of feedback students received (comments and edits) predicted improvement in the quality of writing mechanics only.

Exploring Teachers' Written Feedback and Student Essays: A Qualitative Perspective

To better understand our findings, we returned to our corpus of essays to investigate more closely the relationship (or lack of relationship) between the type of written feedback students received and changes in the quality of their essays over successive drafts. As illustrated in Table 3, most of the students in our sample received only surface-level feedback. The following drafts of a seventh-grade student's essay provide a good example of the type of written feedback students received, as well as of the lack of substantive improvement in the quality of their work. In the case of this writer, all teacher feedback addressed surface-level issues.

This essay, considered by the teacher to be of relatively high quality for the class, describes the qualities of a hero. Comparing the first draft with the fourth and final draft, we see that some words were changed (e.g., being "respective [*sic*]" was changed to being a "role model") and a few organizing phrases were added (e.g., "these are the requirements of being a hero"). Substantive improvement in quality, however, only occurred in the area of spelling and punctuation. In fact, it is notable how little the essay changed from the first to the fourth draft. The teacher made a number of edits on each draft focusing on correcting spelling, word usage, punctuation, and grammar, and the student appeared to have copied most of these

teacher edits from draft to draft. This is likely why the essay improved in the quality of writing mechanics (and why the amount of feedback predicted some improvement in quality for middle school student essays). Clearly, however, the student was not provided with the guidance that would have been necessary to substantively develop the ideas expressed in the composition (see Figure 1).

Draft 1

What is a hero? A hero is someone who would sacrife any thing and would have to be someone who would influene you not in a bad but in a good way. Heroes would have be very tolerant too. A hero would also be very respective and most of all would have a good soul.

A hero most of the time is very persistant. He would never give up no matter what anyone said. They might have a lot of very putdown's, but that would never stop him. When a hero reaches his goal he is most of the time admired or celebrated.

Most of the time, when a hero has reached his goal, he influence's many other people. Sometimes by the influence of that hero he gives rise to anew hero. Or sometimes if that hero has an enormuse positive self-essteem he might influence him self to do another positive act or event.

One of the most important thing you have to do to be a hero is be a role-model. I have never seen a hero that is a no mannered, disrespectful person for an example my personal hero is my dad. He is a perfect rolemodel & I have never seen him drunk or disrespecting any one.

Draft 4 (final)

What is a hero? A hero is somebody who would be persistent & do anything to help you. It would be necessary that he would influence you not in a bad But in a good way. Also every hero would have to be a role model. I think these are the requirements to be a hero.

A hero most of the time is very persistent. He would never give up, even though the battle is all uphill. They might get a lot of putdown's but would not be enough to stop them. When a hero reaches his or her goal, he is most of the time admired or celebrated.

Most of the time when a hero reaches his goal, he influences other lives. Sometimes if that certain hero has an enourmuse amount of self-esteem he might influence himself to do another positive act or event.

One of the most important requirements you need to have to be a hero is to be a role model. I have never seen a no mannered, disrespectful person that was ever called a hero. For example, one of my personal hero's is my dad, because I have never seen him drunk or disrespecting anyone & that makes him a perfect role-model.

Figure 1. Seventh-grade essay that received surface-level feedback only.

We wondered why content-level written feedback also did not lead to substantive improvement in the quality of student work. To explore this issue further, we took a closer look at the nature of the content-level feedback students received on their essays and the degree to which students incorporated this feedback into the final drafts of their essays.

Overall we found that all of the content-level feedback elementary students received and about half of the content-level feedback received by middle school students were requests of some type to add clarifying information. For example, after one third-grade student wrote "They went to sleep and had nightmares," the teacher inserted "about what?" In a seventh-grade student's essay, the student wrote "We use twice as much water"; the teacher circled the word "we" and wrote next to it "Who is we?" and wrote "meaning?" after other sentences.

To investigate the degree to which students incorporated their teachers' feedback, we traced the specific feedback students received on early drafts to their final drafts. For the elementary school essays we found that only three out of seven student essays showed evidence of students incorporating their teachers' request to add or clarify information. For example, one student's essay that showed evidence of incorporating the teacher's feedback was a story called "The Teacher from Outer Space." On the preliminary draft the student wrote "They went to bed and had nightmares." The teacher circled "nightmares" and wrote "about what?" In the final draft, the student wrote "They went to bed and had nightmares about the teacher taking off her skin." Another student for that same assignment, in contrast, was not able to successfully incorporate the teacher's feedback in the final draft of his story, "Shark Enemies." In the first draft this student wrote "One day there were another army that was nicer." The teacher circled "army" and wrote "of who?" In the final draft of the student's story the descriptor "nicer" was changed to "friendlier," but the student did not clarify who constituted his story's army. The sentence remained virtually unchanged: "One day there were another army that was friendlier."

The following drafts of an essay written by a third-grade student, considered by the teacher to be of high quality for the class, illustrate typical content-level written feedback in our sample and attendant influence on student work within our small corpus of elementary school student essays with such feedback (see Figure 2). The teacher's goals for the writing assignment included the requirement that students learn to write in a "report of information" style. The content-level comment on the following first draft of a student's report about sharks was a request to add a

Draft 1

Sharks have sharp teeth and they have clod booled. Some sharks live in undergourd and they eat fish and seals so they could sravey. I they are cool shark. They could grow from twenty feet. They are bad because there are different kinds of sharks. I saw a show about sharks that a man shark could pull your legs. Shark could swim fast as people there are lot of shark at the ocean and shark like to fight other for fish since sharks live in Mediterranean sea the biggest shark is the whale shark there are the meber shark of family the baby was caught in Florida they could weighed over 15 tones. Sharks live in warm water.

Draft 2 (final)

The Sharks

Sharks have sharp teeth and they are cold blooded. They breath through gills. Sharks live near reefs in the ocean. They eat fish and seals so they can survive. They are dangerous. They could grow from twenty feet. They are mean because there are different kinds of sharks. Some sharks can bit your legs you could die. Sharks could pull your legs. Sharks can swim fast as people. There are lot of sharks in the ocean. Some sharks like to fight other sharks. They fight for fish some sharks live in Mediterranean sea the biggest shark is the whale shark. There are other members of the shark family. The baby was caught in florida. They could weigh over fifteen tons. Sharks live in warmwater.

Figure 2. Third-grade student essay that received content-level feedback.

title and "more facts about sharks." The teacher also changed the student's statement that sharks live "underground" to sharks "live near reefs in the ocean." The student's initial description of sharks as "cool" also was changed by the teacher to "they are dangerous," and "bad" was changed to "mean." Most of the written feedback concentrated on spelling, grammar, punctuation, and word usage. These changes are evidenced in the final draft of the essay, along with the added fact that sharks breathe through gills.

As shown in Figure 2, the student's punctuation and sentence structure changed quite noticeably towards the written standard. And in keeping with the assignment's goal, that of writing an information report, more personal notes from the first draft—"I they are cool shark [*sic*]" and "I saw a show about sharks"—disappear and are replaced by a few "more facts about sharks" and a title, "The Sharks." As in a number of other information reports observed by the third

author, the essay is reminiscent of an encyclopedia and amalgamates rather than summarizes facts, such as in the somewhat illogical "They are mean because there are different kinds of sharks." It is perhaps the impersonal origin and approach that account for this rather haphazard reporting. And for the most part, the organization and content of the essay remain unchanged from the first to final drafts.

For our corpus of seventh-grade essays that received content-level feedback ($n = 22$), approximately two thirds of the students incorporated the teachers' comments into the final drafts of their essays ($n = 15$). Whether there was a substantive change in the quality of the essay, however, appeared to depend on the nature of the feedback the student received in tandem with a student's response. Only half of the seventh-grade essays ($n = 10$) received content-level feedback that was text-specific and appeared to provide students with at least some guidance for how to *substantively* revise their work. Of these 10 essays, eight of the final drafts showed evidence of having incorporated teacher feedback.

We looked at two student essays in particular that received text-specific content-level feedback from the teacher. We believe that in both cases, the feedback offered the students an opportunity to make substantive revisions to their work. The students' assignment was to analyze an article from an environmental magazine and write a letter to the appropriate agency in which they identified the causes of the problem and posed a workable solution. One student wrote in his preliminary draft "What you can do to help support efforts to stop the poaching of mountain tapirs and ensure their protection in Ecuador you can contact Wildlife Conservation International." In response to this, the teacher wrote "You need to pose a solution and show how it might work." In the final draft, the student added four suggestions for saving the tapirs including "What we can do to stop this is to divide the land, half for the hunters and half for the mountain tapirs." Another student with the same assignment, in contrast, did not (or was not able to) incorporate the teacher's feedback into his final draft. The teacher on the preliminary draft of this essay asked the student to "explain about wood," and to clarify whether the student was referring to "the government or U.S. companies?" The student did not clarify this point or provide additional information in his final draft.

The following is an additional example of an essay that was substantively revised between the preliminary and the final drafts in response to the teacher's content-level feedback. In this assignment the teacher asked the students to analyze the poem "Alone," by Maya Angelou, by "explaining the speaker's thoughts while

connecting the poem to their knowledge of the world." Students were then asked to revise their first drafts (a response to a writer's prompt) into a "well-organized essay" (see Figure 3).

On the first draft the teacher wrote a general comment to the student, reminding him, "You need four paragraphs. Quote poem and explain. Connect

Draft 1

The speaker of this poem seems to be mentally suffering from how this poem is put together and the message it's sending. The speaker believe that the writer of this poem express her feelings and emotion into this poem. She thinks that no one could love alone and the speaker knows because a person needs a friend or a companion to be with or talk to.

Personally, I think that the message of this poem is to always be good to others in order to have a friend for companionship. You need someone to express your feelings to. I would definitely agree with the speaker of this poem because it is true and a person without a friend is a nobody.

Draft 2 (final)

The speaker of this poem seems to be mentally suffering from this poem. The speaker expresses their feelings into this poem and describing the place that they live in. "The race of man is suffering" which the speaker describe is their world. I think it means that they can't work together and compete with each other.

The speaker knows this because some people are very poor and millionaires are so selfish that they don't think money are to be use on them. Personally, I think that the speaker is tired and sick of their world. I would say that this is like our world because wars are going on and many people are living on the street. "And I can hear the moan" describes my reason of people who don't have a home.

I would say that the main theme of this poem is in your world, start over and let everybody have a chance in life that they have. You should care for others and share your wealth with unfortunately. "There are some millionaires, With money they can't use" are people who are greedy and the message is the opposite because you can use the money to help others.

I would definitely agree with the speaker of this poem because our world is nothing different from it. People are fighting for land and nobody seems to share it. The race of man is suffering is my opinion of everything. The repition helps to say that you need a friend and not fight.

Figure 3. Seventh-grade student essay that received content-level feedback.

poem with outside world." As illustrated in the preceding essay drafts (see Figure 3), the student responded to each of the teacher's comments. The final draft of the essay was expanded from two to four paragraphs, and the student quoted from the poem and connected the content of the poem to the outside world by referencing society's problems, such as homelessness and war. While clearly there still are problems with the essay's syntax, expression of ideas, and general readability, the final draft reflects the writer's additional engagement with the poem and growth in terms of the sophistication of his essay's content.

Seventh graders writing 9 of the 22 essays that received content-level feedback, or less than half, did not get an opportunity to substantively revise their work. As with the elementary school essays, this type of content-level feedback only required students to reword sentences to be clearer and specify pronoun usage. Of these 9 essays, 7 showed evidence of having been revised per teacher instructions. Non-substantive content-level feedback from the teacher was usually incorporated with little change in the nature or quality of the final draft. In one assignment, the teacher asked students to write a letter to another student recommending their favorite book. In the early draft of his letter, one student wrote "This cunning quote is uttered by the character in an excellent novel about Native Americans." The teacher added the character's name, so that this sentence in the student's final draft read "This cunning quote is uttered by the character, True Son, in an excellent novel about Native Americans." The student later wrote "the [*sic*] passages are authentic phrases said by the Indians." The teacher circled "said" and wrote "stronger verb" next to it. In the final draft, this sentence read "the [*sic*] passages are authentic phrases uttered by the Indians." This was the extent of the content-level feedback the student received. Not surprisingly, as with the student referenced in Figure 1 who received only surface-level feedback, this student's final draft was nearly identical to his early draft.

Finally, three essays received substantive content-level feedback on the final drafts only. While this feedback appeared to be of high quality, the fact that it was written on the essays' final drafts likely means that these students did not have an opportunity to make use of this feedback. While it is possible that the teachers might have provided these comments in a conference with the students prior to the submission of their final drafts, it appears to us that this feedback came too late in the writing process to be of use to these students.

Summary of Qualitative Findings

In summary, our qualitative investigation of teachers' written feedback and student essays confirmed our statistical analyses. As expected, the surface-level feedback students received provided them with an opportunity to fix their grammar, punctuation, and spelling errors but not the content and organization of their essays. Not expected by us was our finding that the content-level feedback students received also, by and large, did not provide them with much of an opportunity to substantively revise their work. The small percentage of elementary student essays that received content-level feedback (14% of 50 essays, or 7) only asked students to clarify pronouns and other references in their writing. The middle school essays that received content-level feedback (34% of 64 essays, or 22) were divided in terms of whether students received at least some guidance on ways to substantively revise their work. In our view, approximately half of the essays received text-specific feedback that provided this type of guidance (n = 10) and nearly half received content-level feedback that, as with the elementary school essays, only provided students with an opportunity to clarify their pronouns and other contextual references. A very small number of essays (n = 3) received content-level feedback on the final drafts only. Considering this, it is not surprising that the type of feedback students received predicted improvement in writing mechanics only, as opposed to content and organization (see Tables 5 and 6), and that student work showed only the barest improvement across drafts (see Table 7).

Summary, Conclusions, and Directions for Future Research

Returning to our research questions, most of the written feedback students received on drafts of their compositions was on the surface level in that it pertained to improving punctuation, grammar, and spelling only. Students received little in the way of content-level written feedback on drafts of their writing, especially in the earlier grades. This finding is commensurate with other research that has found that writing teachers frequently attend more to how things are written and less to the content and structure of students' ideas (Beason, 1993; Hopman & Glynn, 1988).

We then investigated whether or not teachers' written feedback predicted improvement in the quality of student work in elementary and middle schools. Our analyses indicated students who received content-level feedback on early drafts of their writing were more likely to increase the length of their final drafts than those students who only received surface-level feedback. When the quality of students'

early drafts was held constant, however, the type of written feedback students received did not predict improvement in the quality of student work. In other words, higher quality first drafts turned into higher quality final drafts and lower quality first drafts turned into lower quality final drafts, with little guidance from instructors and no statistically significant relationship to teacher commentary. The very scarcity of that teacher commentary predicts such an outcome, and it should—and does—raise concerns about the meaning of a process approach that mostly provides students with multiple opportunities to recopy rather than revise their work. The amount of feedback students received (the number of comments and edits) significantly predicted improvement in the quality of writing mechanics only, though the percent of variance explained was relatively small. On a more qualitative note, there is a definite trend towards more standardized language use. Standardized language use was clearly attended to by most of the instructors in our study, since 58% of their comments aimed to standardize some aspect of punctuation, spelling, or grammar, and that focus was reflected in a decreasing number of errors. Middle school students who received content-level feedback also added more to their essays (as measured by an increase in the number of words) than middle school students who received surface-level feedback only. This trend was not apparent in our corpus of elementary school student essays, however.

Since the process approach to writing instruction aims to not only standardize writing but to improve it as well, we took a closer look at the nature of the content-level written feedback received by students. All of these written comments at the elementary school level and about half of these comments at the middle school level were requests for students to clarify the meaning of a particular word or sentence. Generally speaking, these comments were fairly generic in nature and were not explicitly focused on helping students reflect on or substantively reorganize their ideas. Requests to clarify pronouns or "add more facts about sharks" and comments such as "awkward, missing topic sentence," for example, do not invite much reflection on the subject matter or attendant revision.

From a sociocultural perspective, it appears that teachers' written feedback on successive drafts of the essays by and large did not create an opportunity for the kinds of collaborative assisted interactions central to learning. Students copied the corrections in spelling, grammar, and punctuation their teacher made on their papers; they may even have been prodded to draw from other sources, as our third-grade essay about sharks suggests. But on the whole, students were not asked to

engage in genuine revision, and they did not do it on their own. As a result, the quality of student writing showed relatively little improvement over successive drafts. The process approach to writing instruction may have become the official policy in these schools, but its execution does not differentiate it much from earlier approaches to writing instruction. We doubt whether the old "product" approach with its emphasis on error correction could reliably be distinguished from the particular "process" approach implemented by our instructors on the basis of these data.

Our research provides another example of an instructional practice advocated by reformers without much consideration for how to implement it in the classroom. Teachers do not necessarily have the knowledge and skills to implement the practice (in this case the writing process) as it was originally conceived. This problem in implementing new instructional practices has been noted by other researchers (Cohen & Ball, 1994; Spillane & Zeuli, 1999). For example, Cohen and Ball found that even those teachers who actively endorsed a curriculum innovation for teaching mathematics and who claimed to be implementing the innovation in their classrooms did so incorrectly or only partially for the most part. Isolated in their classrooms, teachers are generally left to interpret new approaches to teaching through the lens of their own professional experience. Cohen and Ball concluded that teachers need much more support for implementing reform practices than is generally offered to them in traditional professional development activities. The same point was made rather thoroughly by Tharp and Gallimore (1988) and by McNiff and Leader (1995) and a number of other Action Researchers. Furthermore, the translation of an instructional practice, like the process approach, into a set of measurable standards is difficult (Dyson, 2000).

Reform programs seeking to improve students' literacy skills should include a substantive focus on helping teachers improve the quality of their feedback on student writing at both the elementary and secondary level. Students do not grow as writers in the absence of high-quality feedback, and neither do teachers. As with students, teachers need opportunities for collaborative assisted professional development to grow as instructors and create more effective learning environments for students. They need models of good feedback to students, and they need to see examples of appropriately revised work at each grade level. Our data suggest that teachers are sensitive to the importance of standardizing their students' written language, a primary emphasis of many standardized assessments used to evaluate

students and schools. They may not be paying as much attention to their students' use of writing as a means to develop and communicate ideas.

Future research could assist this process by looking more deeply at the types of written feedback that do improve the quality of student writing so that grade-appropriate models can be generated and shared with teachers. Our research reported here was limited by a small sample size, and may have been limited as well by the general categorical nature of our feedback designations (i.e., surface level versus content level). For example, Ferris (1997) looked at finer categories of written teacher responses to college students who are English language learners and found that text-specific feedback was more helpful than "vague prescriptive remarks" on student papers (p. 333). Future research should likewise look more deeply at the nature of effective written feedback for younger students and attempt to categorize it.

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